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No new laws seen for mines

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WASHINGTON - Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency have moved aggressively to curb airborne mercury emissions from coal-fired electric plants, but they have virtually ignored Nevada's mining industry - and apparently intend to continue doing so.

Even lawmakers who represent Idaho and Utah, which are suffering the effects of severe mercury pollution, are not planning any legislation, their aides said.

Nor are Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., who represents Northern Nevada, or Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and John Ensign, R-Nev., who generally enjoy a close relationship with the mining industry.

"Gold mining has really slipped under the radar," said Bill Eddie, an attorney for three environmental groups negotiating to strengthen federal rules on mercury emissions from Nevada mines.

Mining industry officials say they don't need more regulation because they have adopted strict new standards of their own to limit the "downwind" effects.

Eddie, who represents the Idaho Conservation League, Great Basin Mine Watch and Earthworks, said he hasn't turned to Congress for help - yet. So far, he has been working with the EPA and hopes the agency would eventually adopt new regulations. He sent a letter in October 2004 threatening to sue if the agency didn't better regulate gold-mining mercury, under provisions of the Clean Air Act.

"The mercury fallout from these (Nevada) gold facilities endangers the health of Idahoans and harms our environment," Eddie wrote. "Human exposure to unhealthy levels of mercury is potentially occurring via multiple vectors."

Government officials in Washington in recent years have mostly focused on mercury produced by coal-burning power plants. In March 2005, the EPA released a rule aimed at stricter mercury emissions rules on coal plants, a rule many Democrats said was not strict enough.

EPA environmental engineer Steven Frey said the agency has no plans to impose a national rule that

would more strictly regulate gold mining mercury emissions. Instead, the agency hopes that Nevada will vote this week to impose its own mandatory controls.

"We consider that a very good step," Frey said.

The issue also is not on Congress' radar screen. One Idaho congressional source said no one on the lawmaker's staff had ever heard of the issue.

There has been concern over a proposed Sempra Energy coal plant in southern Idaho, but not over Nevada's gold mining industry, said another source, Mark Warbis, spokesman for Rep. C.L. Otter, R-Idaho.

Nevada lawmakers also said they have no plans to pursue legislation. Reid has been pleased with the industry's voluntary program and the EPA's involvement, Reid spokeswoman Sharyn Stein said.

"They seem to be on top of it and there doesn't seem to be a need for Congress to get involved," Stein said.

Gibbons and House Resources Committee Chairman Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., last year released a report about mercury titled, "Mercury in Perspective: Fact and Fiction About the Debate Over Mercury." It was billed as an exhaustive review of the science on mercury, although it focused mostly on power plant - not gold mine - mercury emissions.

Nevada lawmakers, like many Western lawmakers, have a close relationship with the gold-mining industry. Mining interests gave Reid \$109,000 in his 2004 campaign, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks campaign money. The industry gave Gibbons \$66,000 in the 2002 and 2004 election cycles. It gave Ensign \$87,000 from 2000 to 2004.

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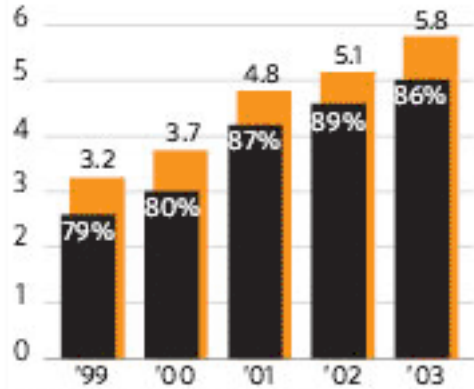
MERCURY WASTE RISING

On-site and off-site reported disposed of or otherwise released mercury or mercury compounds.

■ National total

■ Nevada (as percent of total)

In millions of pounds



SOURCE U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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